



TARGET ACQUISITION

Vietnam Style

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COMMANDERS in Vietnam have uniformly agreed that a bigger problem than killing the enemy is finding and fixing him. The enemy tries to fight on his own terms. He selects the exact battlefield and seeks to lure us in by feinting at a lonely outpost. After we deploy into his carefully prepared battlefield, he will not fight until everything is to his advantage.

General Nguyen Van Vinh, Deputy Chief of Staff of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), describes the tactics

being followed by his frontline commanders in Vietnam as:

- Avoid decisive contact with US forces except when victory is assured.
- Exploit the guerrilla's two main tactical gambits: the ambush and the attack on a fixed installation; strike hard and withdraw swiftly before US firepower can make the operation too costly.
- Conduct a mobile defense-type operation which includes small units widely dispersed over a large battlefield; small company-size units mov-

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ing frequently from one redoubt to the next to avoid B-52 strikes; large units, battalion and regiment, assigned specific killing zones and prepared to execute a variety of contingency plans for each killing zone.

These tactics closely follow the US concept for a mobile defense on a nuclear battlefield, and for the same reason—to avoid massive and hard-hitting airpower. They capitalize on the guerrilla strongpoints—the ability to move and mass units quickly in the jungle, a detailed knowledge of the battlefield, and ease in hiding forces to avoid contact.

Contingency Plan

A typical North Vietnamese contingency plan is shown in the sketch. An NVA battalion is located at its permanent base. This unit has prepared a number of plans based on the assumption that US forces will land at either one or all three landing zones (LZ's).

One plan assumes that US forces will land at LZ's Red and Blue. Upon report of a US unit entering the battle area, the battalion moves from its permanent base camp, using a hidden trail that cannot be seen by aerial ob-

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servers, and occupies a striking position. Once in the strike position, the battalion readies for combat while reconnaissance elements are sent to observe the enemy at LZ's Red and Blue.

Based upon the strength of the air assault force, the enemy commander will decide whether to attack at the LZ or to ambush at prepared sites as his opponent deploys from the LZ. These well-camouflaged ambush positions are located along natural routes that the enemy commander expects the US force to use.

Scout Element

If the air assault force appears too strong to attack at the LZ or is too wise to move along likely routes, then the enemy will assign a scout element to shadow the US unit. Every movement will be watched. Soldiers and weapons will be counted, alert procedures and tactics will be recorded, and every detail of operations will be noted. When the enemy finds a weak spot and thinks he can win without getting bruised too badly, he will attack. If his US target is too alert and its numbers too strong, the enemy will avoid contact, but will harass.

Contingency plans are prepared for all other LZ's and probable ground approaches in the battle area. All plans are prepared in great detail. Mortars are laid and ready to fire, troops rehearse each plan until it is executed flawlessly, leaders record time and distances from all points, and soldiers memorize rally points. But even after all this preparation, if the enemy commander thinks the risks are too high for the probable gain, his force will avoid contact and melt into the jungle and become virtually impossible to find.

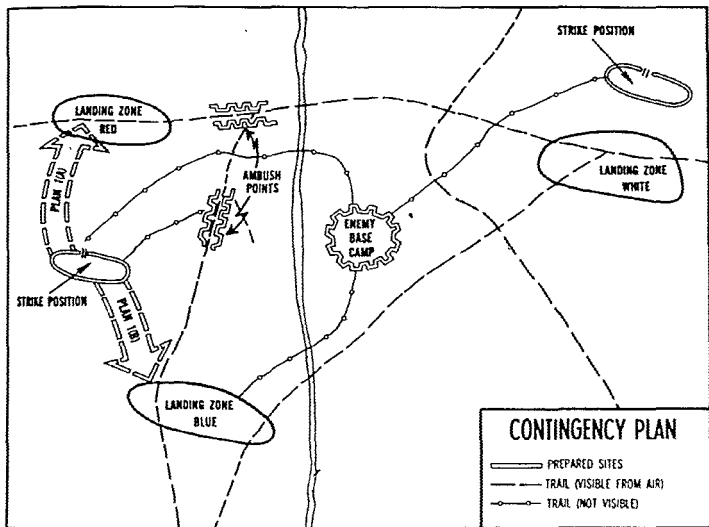
As General Vinh has said, his army

will not fight a positional war. When the US unit launches a massive operation, the enemy will not stand and fight for a jungle base camp or any other piece of real estate. The enemy will move swiftly to a secret, well-camouflaged defensive position. Biding his time, he waits for his chance to attack a small exposed US unit.

The enemy believes that, once the

command and control centers, uncover and smash his logistic apparatus, and to keep him off balance thus spoiling his planned operations. But the big sweep should be just one of several tactical concepts of the commander.

It is difficult to maneuver an infantry force effectively in the thick, knotted underbrush of Vietnam. In an attack situation, a rifle company will



US soldier is on the ground and is separated from his helicopter and other sophisticated equipment, he is at a disadvantage. The enemy has occupied the area of operations (AO) and knows it well which enables him to fight only when it is to his advantage and to break contact quickly and escape a pursuing force.

An occasional sweep by US troops into the enemy's safe areas is militarily necessary to disrupt the enemy's

do well to be able to maneuver effectively more than two squads on line. The obstacles to movement posed by thick, jungle vegetation negate classic infantry maneuver. The enemy concluded long ago that infantry maneuver was not profitable in the jungle. He gave it up. That is why he employs only the ambush and the attack on fixed installations. To beat the enemy in jungle warfare, we must adopt his methods of fighting in the jungle.

Major General (then Brigadier General) Willard Pearson, as commander of the 101st Airborne Brigade in Vietnam, employed a new brand of infantry tactics called the "semiguerrilla" concept and achieved resounding results. This concept is designed around the principles of stealth, deception, surprise, and—once the enemy is

the most important collection source, and he is trained and motivated to produce. Prisoners of war are sought, and the capturers receive appropriate recognition.

Another technique is careful entry into the battlefield. Every effort is made to deceive the enemy when introducing units into an AO. Measures



Army News Features

Brigadier General Willard Pearson, as Commanding General, 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, talks to members of the brigade after a battle

found—mass. These principles are forged into hard-hitting weapons by several techniques.

One of these is the formation of a streamlined intelligence gathering system. First priority is given to collecting intelligence and getting it to the commander as it comes in. Liaison is established with all friendly activities in the proposed AO. The individual soldier is made aware that he is

such as dummy airmobile assaults, clandestine entry by overland infiltration, use of local native forces to act as guides and scouts, night helicopter landings into previously secured LZ's, and placing preparatory air and artillery strikes on an area as a diversion without following up with troop landings are all used.

A third technique is the effective use of the long-range reconnaissance

patrol (LRRP). Small teams of specially trained volunteers are located about the battlefield. They are inserted by a variety of techniques: overland infiltration, day-and-night helicopter infiltration, rappel and parachute insertion, and dropped off as stay-behind forces while operating with a larger unit that moves out of the area. These teams move by stealth to a designated location and establish surveillance over likely enemy routes. All sightings are reported, and lucrative targets are hit by air and artillery. They fight only to avoid capture.

Night Operations

The 101st made effective use of night operations. Troops were specially trained in these operations and soon began to dominate the battlefield at night. Units moved routinely at night, ambushing, patrolling, and moving company-size units into blocking positions deep into enemy-controlled territory. Ambush patrols, spread across the battlefield, were especially successful. During the daytime, they melted into the jungle and stayed inactive.

Silence on the battlefield is also an important technique. After the brigade's units were introduced into the operational area, every effort was made to deceive the enemy as to their deployment. Harassing and interdiction fires were stopped. Airstrikes were not called for unless a worthwhile target was found. Helicopters were not allowed in the AO, and all other aircraft were tightly controlled by brigade.

To reduce the need for resupply, aircraft units entered the operational area with three to five days' modified operational rations such as a mixture of rice and powdered soup. During the

clandestine phase of the operation, units were resupplied at night by helicopter.

Deception Plan

A detailed deception plan was prepared for each operation. If the brigade was to conduct operations to the north, a detailed cover and deception plan would be prepared to conduct operations to the south. It was well known that the Viet Cong (VC) kept every possible staging field under surveillance by scout teams and agents. As soon as a US unit starts to marshal soldiers, helicopters, and tons of supplies at an isolated airstrip, all NVA and VC main forces units within a 50-mile area would be warned.

As part of the deception, detailed extensive reconnaissance would be conducted in the south, liaison established with local indigenous forces in the "dummy" AO, maps distributed, aerial photographs taken and distributed, briefings conducted, and orders issued. Simultaneously, the actual plan for the north was quietly being put together. Then, on D-day, H-hour, just as the deception plan called for, artillery would hit possible LZ's, and airstrikes would be made on possible enemy positions in the dummy AO. Meanwhile, troop helicopters headed south would drop down to treetop level and head due north, flying nap of the earth to the real battlefield.

Surprise, stealth, and deception frequently enabled units of the 101st Airborne Brigade to slip undetected into guerrilla territory. After fixing the enemy, the forces would operate conventionally using all available firepower, mobility, and reserves in an effective employment of mass.

Reaction forces were flown into LZ's selected and secured by LRRP's. These

forces would move quickly to previously selected blocking positions and establish ambushes along enemy routes of withdrawal. Other maneuver forces positioned near the enemy, and supported by air and artillery, acted as beaters to drive him into the fire of the ambush force.

Once contact was made, all combat means were used. Tactical air, artillery, and armed helicopters struck positions and routes of withdrawal. Psychological warfare aircraft orbited the battlefield broadcasting a message from a recently captured soldier of that unit. The guerrillas then realized that their supposedly impenetrable redoubt had been penetrated and that they had been outguerrillaed.

The "semiguerrilla" concept is a secondary, but, nonetheless, real bonus of battlefield economy. The 101st Airborne Brigade required less than 100 tons of supply a day, half the usual requirement of a brigade. Austere use of vehicles and silencing of the battlefield by reduction in helicopter lift and artillery fires were responsible.

"Checkerboard" Technique

A final technique has been referred to as the "checkerboard." This is the updated version of Rogers' Ranger tactics with sharp attention given to finding the enemy. Under this concept, the battlefield was closely studied and battalion-size AO's selected. A plan was then developed calling for a systematic search of each area. A battalion could be assigned five or more AO's to be entered in the priority of where the enemy was most likely to be.

Small search units, normally platoon size, infiltrated the selected areas. Each was assigned a part of the overall checkerboard. Once on the ground, these elements melted into the jungle.

They traveled light and searched for such signs as broken twigs, warm coals in a spent fire, fresh tracks on a trail, freshly dug holes, and the unmistakable odor of the VC.

Each unit set up a well-hidden base, cached supplies and equipment, and established communications. Small patrols searched for trails and streams. Experience had proved that the guerrilla was addicted to both. Once the landscape was studied, ambushes were set with the purpose of capturing a prisoner of war.

Maximum Latitude

The commander of the unit was given maximum latitude to engage or not to engage. In his judgment, if he thought he could destroy the enemy force, or could strike a large fleeting target with tactical air without undue risk to his force, he acted. If the enemy was too strong and the time not right, he hugged his opponent and reported his movements to battalion.

Meanwhile, battalion plotted each checkerboarding unit and sifted through the intelligence. LRRP's located in fixed positions reported enemy activity.

Reaction forces were poised and ready. Once the checkerboarding units found the enemy in size, the battle then changed from a decentralized semiguerrilla operation to a hard-hitting centralized conventional attack.

In an analysis of over 20 brigade or larger size operations, it appeared that the use of large-scale operations to find the enemy was extravagant, unproductive, and militarily unsound. Moving just one brigade to a new AO requires vast resources—hundreds of sorties of C-130 aircraft, tons of supplies, and extensive repairs by engineer troops.

The big problem of the war is to find the enemy, and this must be done as economically as possible. Forces must be carefully organized. A swift, lightly equipped hunter force must first find the enemy, and a much larger, heavily supported killer force should

be held in readiness to pounce on and destroy him.

To win in Vietnam without paying an excessive price in lives and war costs, we must use the soldier in the jungle who has learned how to beat the enemy at his own game.

We went to Vietnam to help stop the terror, to help stop the chaos, to help restore the country to the people who are its rightful owners, and to begin the slow process of building toward order, security, and freedom. Fortunately today we are making strides toward that end and the Army and Air Force as a professional body have never looked better. They are well trained and superbly led, capable of innovation and fresh ideas. Our forces are engaged in a new type of war, where the enemy is at once everywhere and nowhere in a battle zone that knows no frontlines and no rear areas.

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